

Part II -- Main Edition -- 13 August 1976

## Don't forget Helsinki

THE ECONOMIST JULY 31, 1976  
(13 AUGUST)

A year after giving all those promises about human rights, Mr Brezhnev has signally failed to make them good. So keep on at him

The trick of appearing to move while standing still is not easy to perform. During the past 12 months the Soviet authorities have signally failed in a valiant effort to perform it. A year ago, on August 1, 1975, Mr Brezhnev signed at Helsinki the final declaration of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), a 35-government gathering which he had long striven to promote and which he would now dearly like to forget. It went badly wrong, from his point of view. He found himself obliged to make all sorts of promises about things that would actually make Europeans feel more secure and help them to co-operate. As he had never meant to do anything like that, it was clear that he would have to order his underlings to go through some appropriate motions but not to comply with the Helsinki terms in any real way. He thus set them a difficult task, even for specialists in doublethink. A year later, it is clear that they have muffed it.

Mr Brezhnev fought for the CSCE because he thought it would enhance his personal stature, because of a mystical faith in the power of unceasing repetition of the word "detente", and because of a Metetrnichian devotion to the idea of getting all of Europe's rulers to promise to respect the status quo. He came up against the non-communist nations' insistence that Europeans were insecure and unco-operative mainly because their continent had been alarmingly divided by a wall of Soviet making. To get the Helsinki show on the road at all, he had to accept in 1973 an agenda requiring the conference to "examine all possibilities" of co-operation "for broader dissemination of information, for contacts between people, and for the solution of humanitarian problems".

He promised at Helsinki that he would "facilitate freer movement and contacts, individually and collectively, whether privately or officially"; "ensure that the fees for travel documents and visas are acceptable"; and "deal in a positive and humanitarian spirit", and as quickly as possible, with requests for exit permits needed for the reuniting of families and for marriages. The same promises were made by the other east European governments. But many hundreds of families remain divided by the iron curtain; thousands of Soviet applicants for exit permits are still being rebuffed; and applicants are still cruelly victimised, despite the Helsinki promise that they would not lose any of their rights.

### Still inside

Three weeks ago it was announced that personal representations made in Bucharest by the French foreign minister had produced permission for 20 Frenchmen to marry their Rumanian fiancées and bring them to France; but Rumania is still keeping hundreds of other engaged couples apart. East Germany has recently permitted more family reunions, but it was committed to doing this before it signed the Helsinki text and it has limited the exit permits mainly to elderly people. In January, Russia reduced the price of an exit visa (from 400 roubles to 300, which still equals the average Russian's salary for two months), and asserted that it was simplifying the complex and daunting procedures

involved. But it has offset these gestures by sharply raising the duties levied on gifts from abroad of both clothes and money; many applicants for visas, being automatically dismissed from their jobs, depend on these gifts for survival.

At Helsinki, the Soviet government promised to improve the dissemination in its territory of imported newspapers and publications and the working conditions of foreign correspondents. The latest reports indicate that, except in Poland, it is still almost impossible for unprivileged inhabitants of eastern Europe and Russia to obtain non-communist newspapers or periodicals. Marginal concessions have been made to journalists. They have been told, for example, that they need no longer apply through the Soviet foreign ministry when seeking interviews with officials in other ministries. They can travel a little farther than before, and give a little less advance notice of their travel plans. But they must still live and work in segregated, guarded ghettos, and Russians make unauthorised contact with them at their peril.

### Orlov is watching Big Brother

At Helsinki, the governments promised to "encourage the effective exercise" of civil, political and other "rights and freedoms". Last week a report showing how far the Soviet government has failed, in this and other respects, to comply with its Helsinki promises was circulated to embassies in Moscow by the group of courageous dissidents, headed by Mr Yuri Orlov, which was formed in May to monitor the government's compliance. The group has found "no changes for the better" on exit permits, and no cessation of such inhumane practices as the forcible taking away of children from parents who adhere to a religion other than Marxism, or the torturing of dissidents in "psychiatric" jails. The KGB has threatened Mr Orlov and his group with dire penalties.

It would be wrong to assume that nothing was achieved by the long struggle to get provisions on human rights and free contacts into the Helsinki text. Since last August the Soviet and east European governments have revealed a worried new sensitivity about these matters. In any east-west encounter, the Russians can no longer shut off all discussion of human rights and contacts by indignantly asserting that these are domestic matters; for, by signing last year's declaration, Mr Brezhnev himself made them matters of legitimate international concern—indeed, of international responsibility. So he cannot complain when Mrs Thatcher makes this first anniversary of Helsinki an occasion for speaking out about his record.

The declaration committed the signatories to a future discussion of the extent of their compliance with its terms. The prescribed discussion will begin at Belgrade next June. At these meetings, all the 35 participating states may face criticism for failure to match the standards of conduct set out at Helsinki. Fair enough. But it is the regime headed by Mr Brezhnev, the initiator of the CSCE, that is liable to be branded with the most abject failure. Before next summer, he will need to do something more impressive than just shuffling his feet.